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MODERN PAINTING IN BELGIUM

by

ALEX SALKIN

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By ALEX SALKIN

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ALEX SALKIN

The author of this pamphlet, ALEX SALKIN, *practiced law in Brussels until the time of the Invasion. He was President of the Young Barristers' Association and an Administrator of the Federation of Belgian Lawyers.*

In 1932 *he was awarded the "Prix Picard" for his eloquent address entitled "Ruptures" which he delivered at the re-opening of the Belgian Courts that year.*

As a director of the Society of "Living Art," devoted art collector, organizer of several exhibitions and distinguished man of letters, he published several works on art and contributed to numerous European art periodicals.

After settling in the United States in 1940, *he became one of the founders of the magazine "Belgium." He served with O.W.I. as radio-reporter, having had fifteen years' experience as news commentator on the Belgian Radio.*

Mr. Salkin has been very active in Belgian-American affairs and is a professor of the Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes in New York.

Modern Painting in Belgium

Introduction.

It is a well-known fact in the history of art that Belgium is traditionally a country of painters. The thousands of artists who have thrived in Belgium since the Middle Ages prove that.

Art flourishes and develops where it meets with the favor of society and where it enjoys a sympathetic cultural atmosphere. Painters have always had an enviable social status in Belgium. Whenever they left their country, they attained high positions in foreign lands. Among others, this is true of J. Sustermans and G. di Bologna in Italy. Sir Anthony van Dijck in England, S. Pereyns in Mexico, Philippe de Champaigne and J. Duquesnoy in France. On the other hand, Belgium is a country of humanists, antiquarians and collectors. Albert Dürer, in his notes on his trip through Flanders, describes the Brussels Palace where he examined the treasures of the Aztec Empire among which was a great golden sun sent by Fernando Cortez to the Governess Margaret of Austria. Rubens had a valuable collection of antiques and curios. Everyone in Belgium has always tried to embellish and ornament his home; the houses are roomy, built for banquets and reunions, and often quite sumptuous. From the time of the Middle Ages, every rich or well-to-do Belgian has bought paintings. They are not necessarily good ones, but that matters little, since great schools of art develop from the number and the competition of the artists, since better results are obtained when convention is broken, and since the painter, even when famished, stays as close as possible to the prospective buyer, who may or may not already be convinced.

The admirable civilization born in Flanders in the 14th century persisted without a flaw until the last third of the 16th. It was

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

L. De Winne (1821-1880)
Portrait of Leopold I, King of Belgium

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

F. J. Navez (1787-1869)
The de Hemptinne Family

disrupted by the wars of religion for two centuries. The Lowlands, first under Spanish, later under Austrian rule, lived in an intellectual stupor. The Antwerp printing presses, which had formerly been disseminating the most brilliant culture throughout Europe, printed nothing but devotional literature. The great art of Flanders, still nourished by its past glory, underwent a gradual deterioration for two centuries. It was unusually brilliant until the death of J. Jordaens in 1678. In the 17th and 18th centuries,

Museum of Fine Arts, Tournai

L. GALLAIT (1810-1887)
The Duke of Alva examining the bodies of the Counts Egmont and Hoorn

it produced only secondary talents, portraitists, landscape painters and a few very fine still-life artists.

When liberty was regained in 1830, a vigorous, strong, original art sprang up in Belgium, another proof of the parallelism between the spiritual climate and a flourishing art.

Forerunners.

It is generally felt that the presence in Brussels of the French painter J. L. David at the end of the first quarter of the 19th century is at the origin of the artistic renaissance in Belgium. The tradition of the Rubens atelier was still alive, but weak and dispirited. A Bruges painter, Joseph Suvée (1743-1807), who had known great success in France and in Italy, represented the belated echo of a great past.

David began to attract to his atelier a number of young, fresh talents. His best Belgian pupils were J. Odevaere (1778-1830), Mathias van Brée (1773-1839), P. van Hanselaere (1786-1862)

A. WIERTZ (1806-1865)
The Rosebud

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

and, above all others, François Joseph Navez (1787-1869). Out of this new group there developed an academic, classical, neo-Roman and neo-Greek school of painting, which places emphasis solely on the drawing; in short, an archeological approach. Color and shades practically cease to exist. This technique, although contrary to the instinctive tendencies of the Belgian genius, established a useful discipline for those painters who had become the weak followers of Jordaens. Yet they did not lose their innate qualities in the process, the qualities which appear so evident when one compares their work with the Hemptinne family portrait by Navez (Brussels Museum).

The romantic fervor of 1830, inspired by the young French school, was more in harmony with the Belgian spirit. The Belgians felt at ease with the great romantic subjects and enjoyed

them to an extreme. Thus, the result was a pitiful sloppiness. Gustave Wappers (1803-1874) adapted the genius of Delacroix to the events that had marked Belgian independence. Louis Gallait (1810-1887), whose work looks rather preposterous at present, dropped all restraint and painted enormous historical pieces: "The Epidemic" (Museum of Tournai), "The Abdication of Charles V" (Brussels Museum) and even that ghoulish piece, "The Beheaded Counts Egmont and Horn" (Museum of Tournai). Gallait became very famous: some of his paintings brought 300,000 gold francs (60,000 gold dollars). This shows that while

H. Leys (1816-1869)
The Artist's Daughter

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

the love of art may lead people astray, yet, in better circumstances, that love brings forth a true art.

In Antoine Wiertz (1806-1865) we find some of the faults of Gallait, faults which are actually national defects, to wit: extravagance, grandiloquence, a torrential bathos and pathos. But Wiertz had travelled. He knew France, Germany and Italy. He had a solid classical background which, despite his megalomania, makes him an outstanding figure in the history of Belgian art. His works are kept in a showy house, in the heart of the sleepy old upper-class quarters of Brussels. One visits this museum as though

C. Meunier (1831-1905)
Girl from the Mines

C. Meunier Museum, Brussels

Collection Mrs. Oppenheim-Errera, Princeton, N. J.

C. MEUNIER
Landscape in the Mining Area

it were a slightly scandalous curiosity, which looks a little like a fair exhibit, a Boris Karloff setting and a secret cabinet. Schoolboys walk about in it overawed; they are not admitted to certain rooms where they would see the severed head of Patrocles, a beautiful young girl courted by a skeleton, a scene from hell, all kinds of gruesome bric-a-brac, painted with a hallucinatory reality. The generations after Wiertz have been unjust to his memory. He was not a caricature of Rubens, whom he imitated in bluffing attitudes; he was a precursor of surrealism, but one who knew nothing about it; he opened the way to a reasoned technique by exploiting his own lonely and unreasonable genius.

A few years later, Henry de Groux (1867-1930) worked in the same spirit of grandiloquence. He was greeted as a phenomenon by some supercilious esthetes. His painting "Christ aux outrages" is the testimony of a generous soul, comparable to Léon Bloy's. Like Wiertz, de Groux tried to force the traditional barriers of painting.

Among the worthwhile romantic painters the best one is undoubtedly J. B. Madou (1796-1877), who was a genre painter,

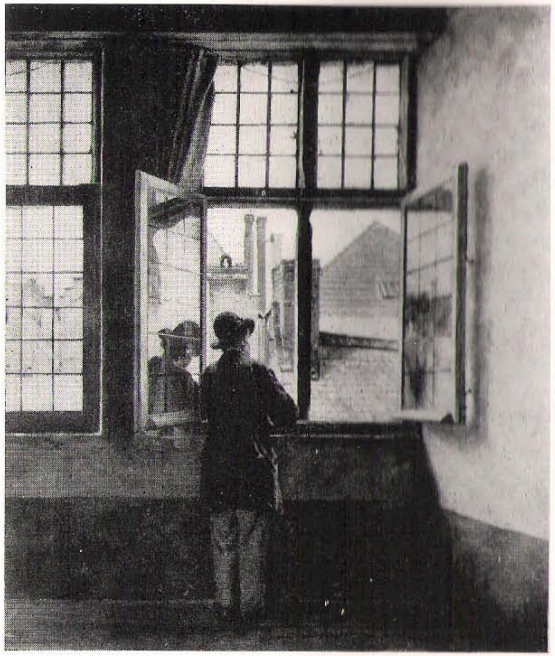
producing pleasant anecdotic works. He follows with grace the tradition of Teniers and the Dutch minor masters.

There is little to be said about the meager production of Jean Portaels (1818-1895), who travelled in Europe and Africa and introduced the use of cosmopolitan subjects which led Alfred Stevens (1823-1906) to success. Stevens left Belgium and acquired a Parisian elegance. He is the prime example of the fashionable painter. His technique is delicate and his search for perfection was so successful that it makes one forget the lack of spirit in his works. At that moment, the bourgeois buyers who were fond of Stevens were not yet ready to take sides in the quarrel between the "fauves" and the traditional painters. They only wanted nice ornaments for their drawing-rooms.

Much more important is Henri Leys (1815-1869). Leys was inspired by national history. He did away with all kinds of false symbolism and miraculously rediscovered the tragic greatness of the 16th century in the Lowlands. This greatness by which he was haunted was expressed in a technique which discarded

H. DE BRAEKELEER (1840-1888)
The Artist's Daughter

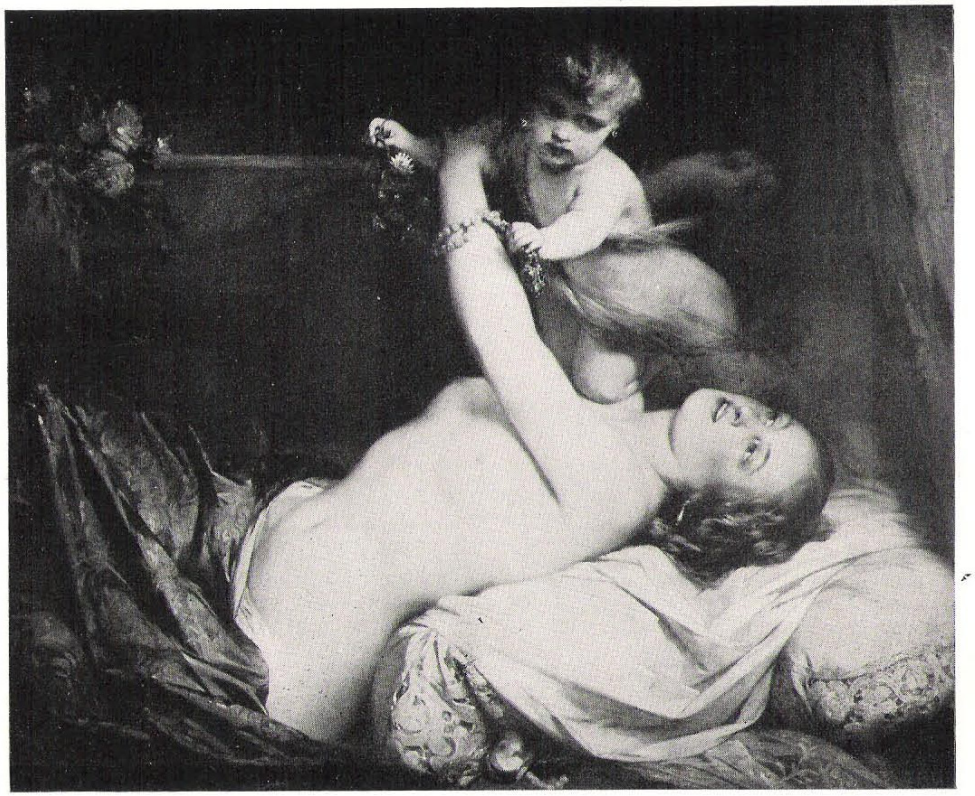
Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels



Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

H. DE BRAEKELEER (1840-1888)
The Man at the Window

romanticism and was inspired by the German masters of the 16th century. In his work one finds the virile accents of Cranach and Holbein. His palette is smooth. He may be called a precursor of the pre-Ralphaelites. He left some masterpieces, such as the "Creation of the Order of the Golden Fleece" (Laeken Palace) and the "Preparation for the Feast" (collection of General Thys). "He brought out the poetry in an infinite variety of beings and objects; he observed his personages in their slightest traits; he placed them in the setting of their times, between decaying walls, on pavements worn by the footsteps of many generations. He returned to the conscientiousness of the primitives . . ." (Max Rooses, *Art in Flanders*, p. 307). His pupil and successor, Henri de Braekeleer (1840-1888), preferred to historical subjects the impressions of reality, which he renders with the meticulous grace of Pieter de Hoogh and sometimes even of Vermeer. He exalts



Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

G. WAPPERS (1803-1874)
Mother Playing with Child

and ennobles the humblest things, the work of the "Cartographer" (Brussels Museum). The patina of his paintings is warm and golden, like the crust of a bread. The works of his last period contain daring elements which announce a new style.

The portraitist Liévin de Winne (1821-1880), who is closer to Delacroix than to Ingres, has a real nobility. He left the definitive pathetic character-study of Leopold I.

Animal painting has always been greatly favored in the Lowlands. It was practised in many different styles. Eugène Verboeckhoven (1799-1881) was academic, Louis Robbe (1806-1877) romantic, Alfred Verwée (1838-1895) regionalistic; Jan Stob-

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Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

J. STEVENS (1819-1892)
Dog

baerts (1838-1914) was a painter in the great Flemish tradition, sometimes gifted with a plastic intuition of nearly prophetic quality; and finally, there was an authentic genius, very little known outside of Belgium: Joseph Stevens (1819-1892). Stevens painted dogs with more love and truth than his brother Alfred painted the lovely Parisian women. The discretion of his tone, which favored ochre, brown, gray, yellow, tan, all colors which at that time were unconventional, allowed him to create the same exquisite harmonies that 60 years later would be noticed in the first Cubist paintings of Braque, Picasso and Juan Gris. His drawing is intellectual and nervous and goes back to Dürer and Bruegel. The composition is tasteful and discreet. It shows great sensitivity and distinction; these are rare qualities with the Belgian painters who all too easily abandon themselves to their hereditary

Boston Museum of Fine Arts

A. STEVENS (1823-1906)
Meditation

generous, lyrical temperament. Truly this painter of dogs is a great painter.

Everyday life, the humble daily effort of men and women in their natural surroundings, have been the favorite themes of the Belgian artists since the illuminators of the manuscripts, since Bruegel's paintings of the seasons and of the bridal feast. One of the first painters in the 19th century to go back to these themes for inspiration was Charles de Groux (1825-1870). This austere painter expressed in his art "the democratic and social ideas proposed by Proudhon in his books and by Courbet in his

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

CHARLES DE GROUX (1825-1870)
Saying Grace

paintings" (Camille Lemonnier). The best paintings by de Groux are animated by a sentiment of despair, by a revolt against social injustice. His macabre humor foretells the mask paintings of James Ensor.

The man who was to be the great sculptor of labor, Constantin Meunier (1831-1905), started out as the painter of the workers. He discovered the beauty of the factories and the workshops, of the metallurgical plants, and to these subjects he gave a dramatic splendor, representing them exactly, in their black and gray tonalities. "For the first time," says Camille Lemonnier, "he revealed an inferno, a world of iron and fire."

Many painters of that period were drawn to the same subjects as were de Groux and Meunier. The fashion of the moment was responsible for this, to a certain extent. Furthermore, at that time Belgium was the haven for a number of exiles and revolutionists like Karl Marx, Courbet, Victor Hugo, Henri Rochefort. Very often the refugee, grateful for the welcome he receives, renders service to his land of exile.

For Léon Frédéric (1856-1940), the world is peaceful, bucolic, even Virgilian. He is interested in the little people, but his sympathy does not contain any social connotations. He is a painter of local inspiration but is sincerely moved by what he sees.

Eugène Laermans (1864-1940) is an artist of much greater importance. The spectacle of human misery moves him and provokes his indignation. He has also remembered the lessons of Bosch, Bruegel and Daumier. He knows the grotesque and terrible aspects, the grimacing ugliness of people crushed by destiny. His style may be conventional at times but his composition is always strong and balanced. Laermans brought a "new spirit" to Belgian art.

The great French and English landscape painters of the time had their counterparts in Belgium. Théodore Fourmois (1814-1871), a belated disciple of Hobbema, is only a theorist of the landscape, while Hippolyte Boulenger (1837-1874) has an innate sense of the pastoral beauties. He left the city and went to live on the border of the Soignes forest in the beautiful village of Tervueren where he spent most of his short existence. Several other painters soon joined him. They learned from Boulenger to bring into their paintings a special atmosphere, with light filtering through branches and sunsets illuminating the fields and the woods.

Théodore Baron (1840-1899) interpreted the most romantic aspects of the Meuse valley, expressed with a certain harshness. He came close to the French tradition.

The Belgian coastline, although not extensive, plays a great role in the material and spiritual life of Belgium. Wide beaches, swept by the tide twice a day, as if the meticulous Flemish cleanliness had ordered it, are there to please children and make artists marvel. Marine painters in Belgium are therefore numerous and excellent.

As far as technique is concerned, P. J. Claeys (1819-1900) is a precursor. Sometimes the waves he paints are fixed, as in the

L. FREDERIC (1856-1940)
The Ages of the Worker—Central Panel

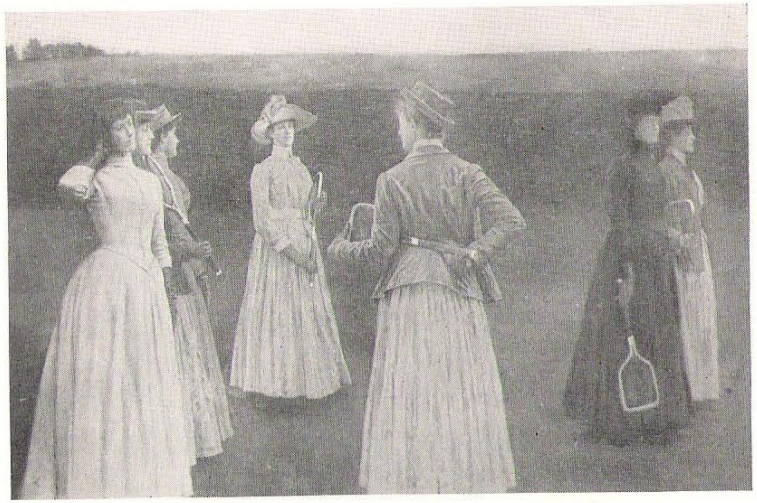
Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

F. ROPS (1833-1899)
The Insult

paintings of the 18th century, but his study of light improved constantly.

Louis Artan (1837-1896) is a master. In his paintings color is the movement and the soul of his work. "The mixture of French and Flemish blood may account for his particular character which combines strength and grace . . . The waves tremble beneath his brush . . ." (C. L., "Ecole Belge," p. 152).



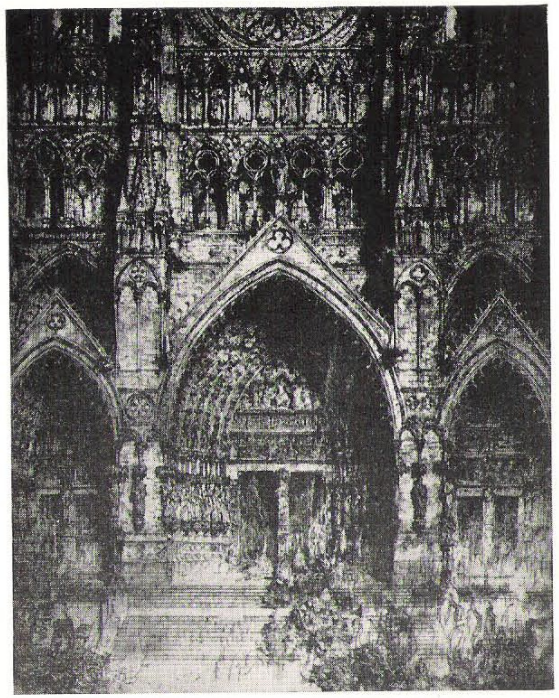
Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

F. KHNOPFF (1858-1921)
Memories

Xavier Mellery (1845-1921) is the painter of silence and meditation, of dormant landscapes, of shadow and solitude. He is contemplative, personifying the dreamy melancholy of the Walloon temperament. He sacrifices light for form, movement for the pose, the reality for the dream.

Through his misty landscapes, his skillful depiction of snow, Guillaume Vogels (1836-1896) comes close to French Impressionism. The boldness of his vision, in its transformation of the world of feeling, makes him to some extent a forerunner of the next generation of painters.

Emile Claus (1849-1924) has had a profound influence on Belgian painting. Aside from the Tervueren painters, he was the first to devote himself to one specific corner of earth, the banks of the Leie (Lys). He examines profoundly those aspects of reality which he has taken for his themes, the trees, the sky and the water. The anecdotic nature of his canvases gradually disappears. Without imitating Monet, Sisley or Pissaro, he assimilates and retains the lesson of impressionism. In the poetic words of Emile Verhaeren, "his works are illuminated with the light of Flanders."



JULES DE BRUYCKER (1870-1945)
Cathedral of Rouen—Etching

With less exuberance and vitality, Albert Baertsoen (1866-1922) painted the inanimate cities, the dilapidated houses along the stagnant canals of Ghent and Bruges. He has a profound poetic feeling for the sadness of the provinces beneath leaden skies drawn in dull, delicate coloring.

Frans Courtens (1854-1943) is a respecter of tradition. He is the painter of sunlight. Victor Gilsoul 1867-1939) excels in scenes of canals and dikes.

J. Degreef (1852-1894) expresses the lyrical rustic setting of the outskirts of Brussels. He has drawn the calm, serene ponds of the Rouge Cloître. The people of Brussels will not forget this sincere painter's friendly illustration of their Sunday promenades.

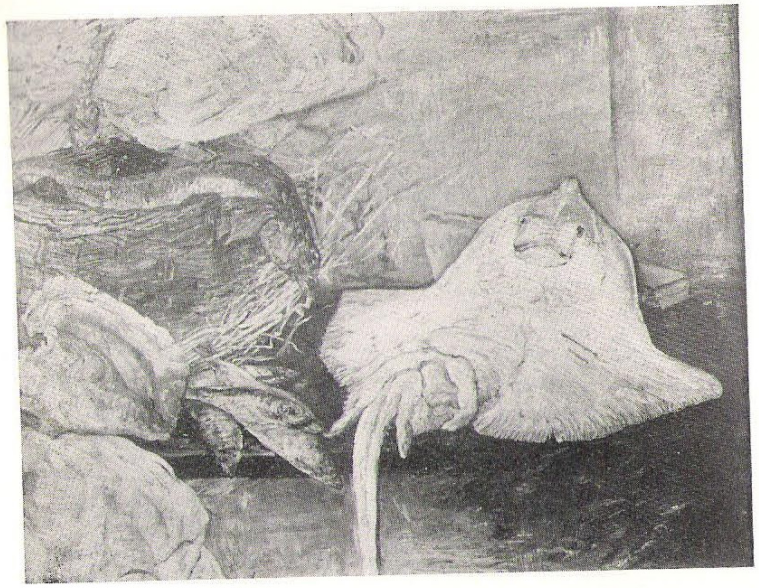
The etchings of Félicien Rops (1833-1899) are highly original,

difficult to classify and often achieve real greatness. His sensual, febrile imagination is combined with a very able technique. He never loses self-control. "He can express the neurosis of modern life without being touched by it." After Rops, it is fitting to cite another etcher, Charles Doudelet (1861-1938). Inspired by the old lieder and legends, he ornamented the songs of Maeterlinck with magnificent woodcuts. Having attained this degree of perfection and splendor, illustration then becomes a major art.

The great aesthetic upheaval brought about in England by the pre-Raphaelites and the theories of John Ruskin had various echoes in Belgium. These were often distorted because of the very warmth of the welcome. But Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) is something more than an aesthete; he has his own style. In his vast compositions and in his still-lifes we rediscover the exact characteristics of Corinthian ceramics.

Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent

E. CLAUS (1849-1924)
Skaters



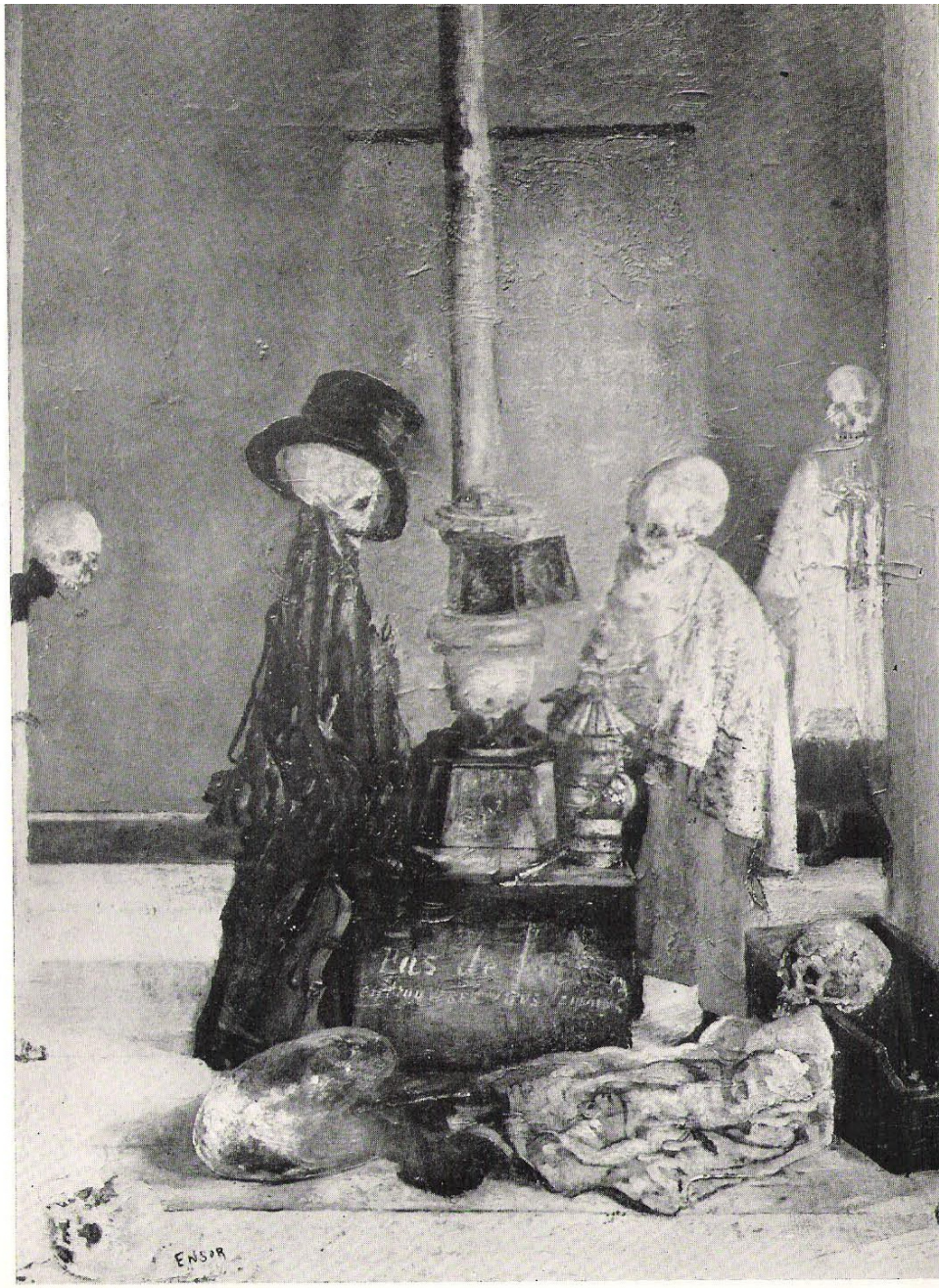
Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

JAMES ENSOR (1860)
The Skate

The Moderns.

We have come to the end of the 19th century, to the era of "our awakening" when, according to Luc and Paul Haesaerts, "nerves, minds and hearts began to vibrate on a new note." The art circles (l'Art Libre, l'Essor, le Sillon, la Libre Esthétique), and various controversial publications, such as "l'Art moderne," followed a course parallel to that of the new literary trends set in motion by Demolder, Verhaeren, Giraud, Jules Destrée, Lemonnier, Octave Maus, Edmond Picard. The period was to open with thirty years of struggle for art. This was the glorious reign of Leopold II. Flemish literature had already introduced or was about to present Guido Gezelle, Albrecht Rodenbach, Hugo Verriest, Stijn Streuvels, Karel Van de Woestijne, August Vermeylen . . .

In 1880 came the awakening for which the way had been prepared by the presence in Brussels of great writers and thinkers like Karl Marx, Montalembert, Deschanel, Victor Hugo, Verlaine



Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

JAMES ENSOR (1860)
Skeletons Around a Stove

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

JAMES ENSOR (1860)
Masks and Death

and Rimbaud, and by the appearance in the avant-garde galleries of the works of Redon, Degas, Carrière, Renoir, Manet, Pisarro, Sisley, Seurat, Gaughin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cézanne, Van Gogh.

Brussels beat with the pulse of a universal spirit. Once again the city became an international center of thought. The Théâtre de la Monnaie, where Wagner was first given in French, knew a period of splendor, inviting Chausson, Chabrier, Fauré and Bizet to make known their innovations. César Franck was there, and Guillaume Lekeu, and soon Ysaye. Modern architecture found expression with Victor Horta and Henry Van de Velde.

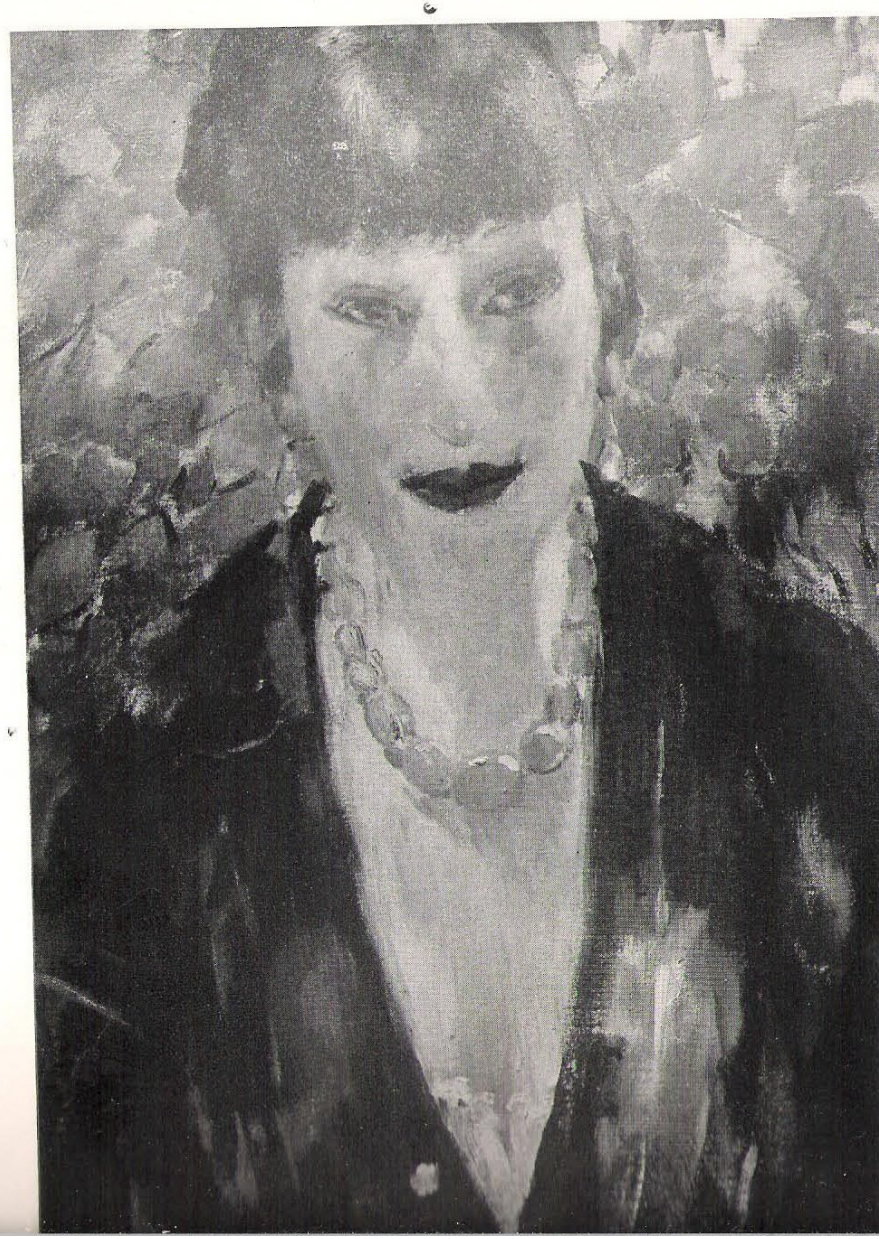
There was a more favorable atmosphere for literary and artistic creation.

Theo Van Rysselberghe (1862-1926) introduced French neo-impressionism into Belgium. Although he was still greatly under the influence of Seurat, he was particularly important because he popularized new techniques of "divisionism."

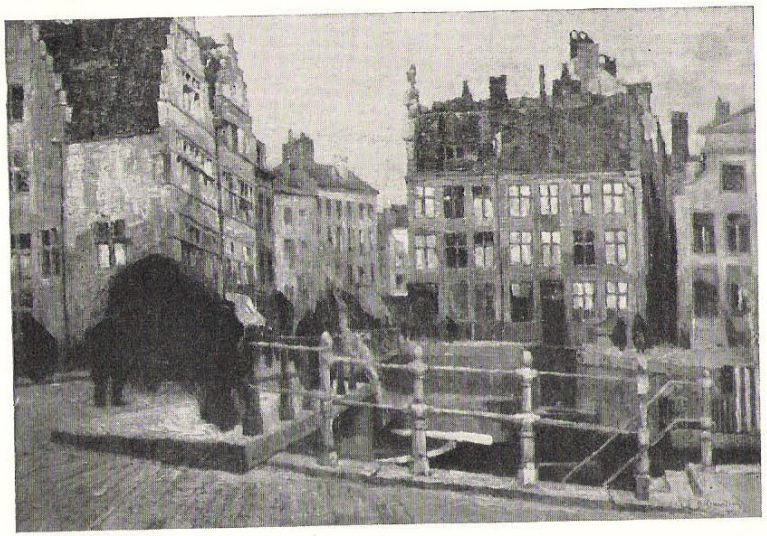
Within eighteen months, by the time he was twenty, James Ensor (1860) had painted "The Lamplighter," "Poachers," "The Ferryman," "Bourgeois Salons," "Oyster-eater," "Russian

RIK WOUTERS (1882-1916)
Reflections

Collection Baronne Lambert, Brussels



H. EVENEPOEL (1872-1899)
Little Girl with Hood—Detail



Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

A. BAERTSOEN (1866-1922)
Evening in Ghent

Music," "Roofs of Ostend," "Street in Flanders." These bear witness to the fact that he is the greatest Belgian artist since Rubens.

We are dealing with an extraordinarily complex personality, a mixture of grandeur, grace, gentleness, spirit, faith, reason and folly. The gifts of genius and the weakness of all the capital sins are his. His labor is enormous, his laziness without remorse. He loves life and cultivates the images of death. Patient as an angel in the presence of eternity, he is impatient as a schoolmaster faced with everyday annoyances. He is a misanthropist, yet he loves esteem; sinful, yet full of superstitions. He is solitary and famous, middle-class and emancipated, bohemian and philistine. He was born in Ostend, on the shore of the North Sea, which he hardly ever left; yet he is also a citizen of the world, the greatest of travellers, but one who never really departed. It has been said that he died, but he is very much alive. A monument erected in his honor in his native city was destroyed by bombing. He survives his monument, his century and his city. He has shouldered his way through life and has tricked death; he has tamed the devil and made him into his guardian angel. If Byron had been a painter,

Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent

TH. VAN RYSSELBERGHE (1862-1926)
The Poetry Reading

he would have been Ensor; the octogenarian Rubens might be Ensor. His music, literature and eloquence are like his shells and masks. He mixes his subject and objects. He will enter paradise with an odd escort of scamps, sorceresses and wenches.

After the master strokes of his first eighteen months of work, Ensor began to paint his "menacing cooks" and his "bad doctors." In these he bears a relationship to the sculptors and decorators of the cathedral facades. He grasps the anecdote, but does not stop there, as does Daumier. He lifts the anecdote out of its immediate setting and, through the magic of a transfigured vision, endows it with universal truth. The personages have no more importance, as regards their names or the occasion evoked, than do those who inhabit Dante's Inferno. They exist on an eternal plane.

Ensor writes, "I confined myself within the solitary world of the mask, full of violence, light and brilliance." This statement opens the period of the masks and masquerades, traceable, we believe, to his recollections from childhood of the Ostend Carnival, and to the impression produced on the artist by the first Negro

G. MINNE (1866-1941)
Mother and Child

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

A. DONNAY (1862-1921)
Annunciation

masks brought back from the Congo. This occurred fifteen to twenty years before the Paris school recognized Negro art.

The painter was often arrested by the mask of masks: death. There followed still-lifes, peopled with fans, shells, satin slippers, and treated like masks, like symbols.

Everywhere, and especially in his gigantic work "The Entrance of Christ into Brussels" and in his etchings ("The Battle of the Golden Spurs," "The Brawl," "The City Hall of Audenarde," etc.), the artist shows an admirable feeling for the multitude. Ensor is one of the rare painters of crowds.

His manner is that of a traditional, innate impressionism which did not need to seek its models in the Paris school. Ensor is incapable of imitating anyone. In this respect he resembles Picasso. He said of himself, "When I steal, I kill."

The rhythm of Ensor's production soon took on a slower pace. The quality has never diminished, except perhaps in the vaguely pointillist pictures of the "Port of Ostend." The very small works done by the painter in his late years express the same sensual

Collection C. Jussiant, Antwerp

E. LAERMANS (1864-1940)
Bathers

fantasy, the same cruel yet kindly delight as the paintings of sixty-five years ago.

This artist of genius, who might have belonged to any great century, has remained throughout his long life the ingenuous, perverse imp that Rimbaud was for a single season.

Jacob Smits (1855-1928), born in Rotterdam, wandered through Europe (Brussels, Munich, Rome) before he discovered a favorable environment on the northern edge of Belgium, in the Kempen (Campine), a region of heaths and dunes in Northern Belgium. His entire life represented a reaction, clearly felt in his work, against facility, brilliance and voluptuousness. He struggles between light and shadow. Isolated in the Kempen, the character of which he synthesizes through landscape and composition, he

Collection Mrs. Oppenheim-Errera, Princeton, N. J.

E. LAERMANS
Landscape

paints with keenness and determination. His brush passes back and forth twenty times over the same spot on the canvas. His color ripens slowly like beautiful fruit. From the darkness he brings forth his favorite scenes and the personages created by his faith.

Henri Evenepoel (1872-1899) is enamored of the manifold aspects of life. The variety of his subjects is infinite: portraits, interiors, landscapes, rural and urban scenes, the streets, the parks, the squares, the fair grounds, the Bois de Boulogne, the children, the gypsies and the military.

He left Belgium at the age of twenty. In Paris he studied with Gustave Moreau. He lived in Algeria, returned to Paris, and died there of typhoid fever. All of his work was done within five years (1894-1899).

A Parisian by adoption, Evenepoel studied and appreciated the contemporary French painters; in some respects, he developed along with the impressionists. Today, however, he appears as a precursor. He was a forerunner of Matisse and of fauvism, as well as of

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

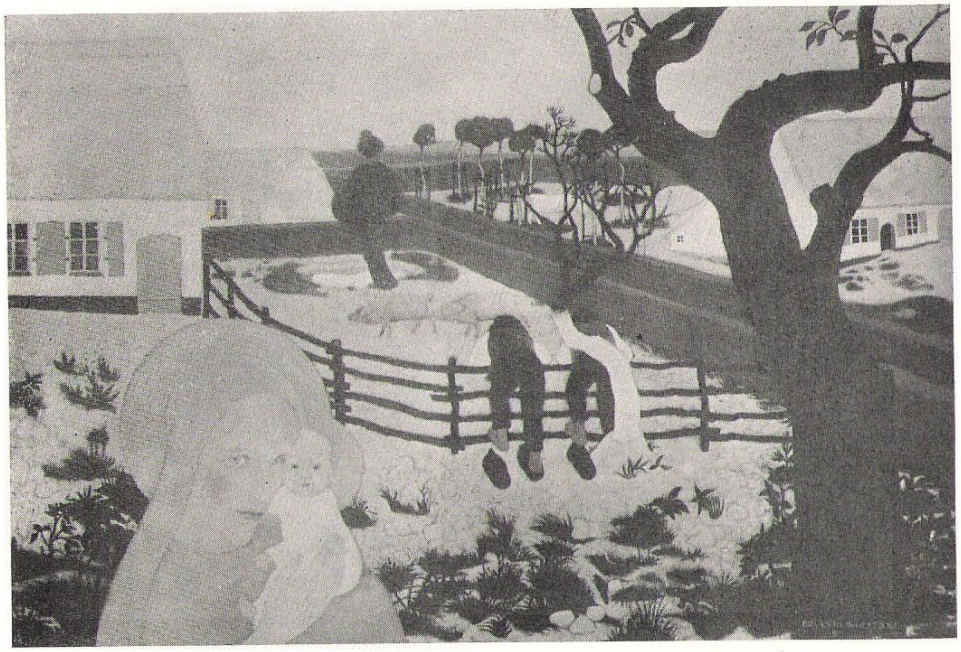
V. DE SAEDELEER (1867-1941)
Winter in Flanders

Rouault, with whom he shared a studio. He is always carried away by his Flemish realism. Despite his youth, he holds an important position in the history of Belgian painting. Although he used a great variety of techniques, one can recognize his canvases immediately.

In feeling, he is, in the words of the Haesaert brothers, "a painter of memories." He paints, as Proust writes, with the "remembrance of things past." This is what gives his work its poetic, intense quality.

Like Toulouse-Lautrec, whom he admired greatly, he was attracted by the decorative arts. He did tapestries, posters, and even some illustrations, still unpublished, for a d'Annunzio novel. But his love of life constantly brought him back to color, to the canvas, and to the poetry of reality.

Rik Wouters (1882-1916), the son of a cabinet-maker from

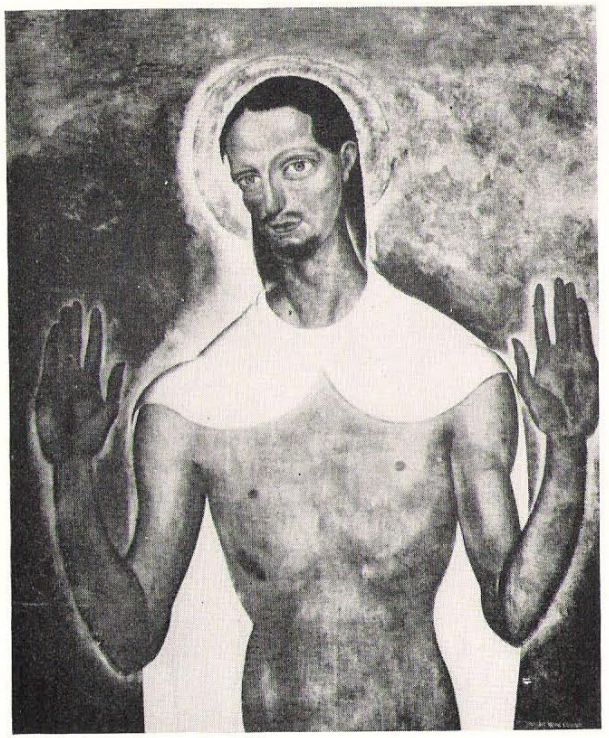


Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

G. VAN DE WOESTIJNE (1881-1947)
Sunday Afternoon

Mechlin, at the age of twenty met the woman he was to love and to paint for the rest of his short life. His was a generous, optimistic temperament, fundamentally sound and strong. If he shows any influence, it is that of Cézanne; Ensor provided only a starting-point. Some critics place him with the fauve painters, although Wouters exhibited a greater penetration, a more incisive character than is evident in Matisse and the others of this group. His work has an extraordinary sparkle. In spite of his war wounds from which he died after much suffering, there is no trace of sadness. He dwelt in the instinctive enchantment of the gifted artist. A sculptor, as well as a painter, one might say of him that "he sculpted color." The excellent colorist Auguste Oleffe (who can be credited with "rehabilitating black") has left a very tender portrait of his friend and source of inspiration, Rik Wouters.

Belgium, the land of guilds and corporations, the country where men unite to gain strength, has always been favorable to collective



Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp

G. VAN DE WOESTIJNE
Christ

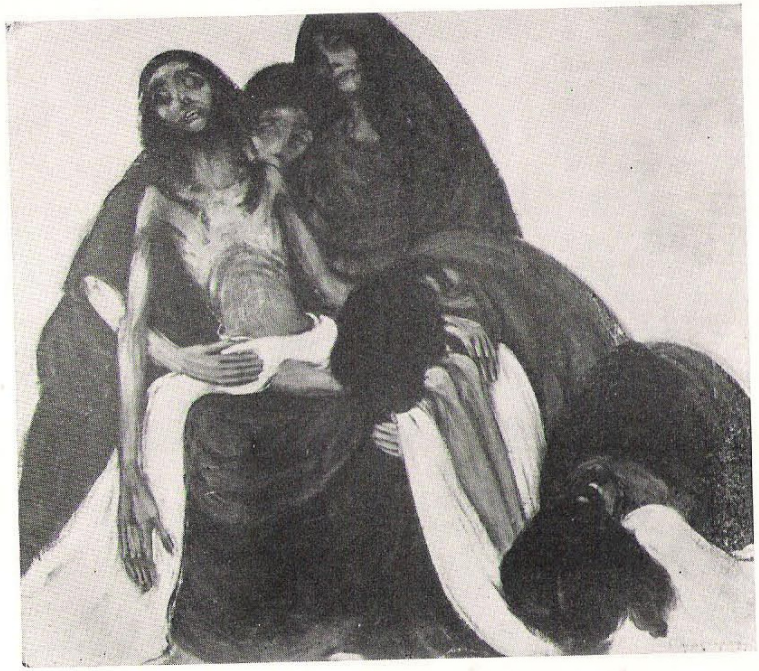
groups of men practising the same art or profession. The magnificent isolation of Jacob Smits in his retreat, of James Ensor in his mirage of Ostend, Evenepoel's submergence in the tumult of Paris, these are exceptional cases. Belgian artists live within a hive or cell of their own creation. This is often a source of weakness, for the monotony of their lives, closed off from the outside world, is in turn responsible for monotony in their creative work.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the history of Belgian art has seen a memorable victory for the group spirit, a victory which may be shortlived, but which reaffirms, in the midst of the twentieth century, the ideal and the way of living of the time of Van Eyck and Memling at Bruges, of Matsys and Rubens at Antwerp. St. Martens-Laethem, a village lost among the meanderings of the

J. SMITS (1855-1928)
Portrait of a Lady

C. PERMEKE (1886)
The Fiancés

Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels



Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

A. SERVAES (1883)
Piéta

Leie river to the south of Ghent, has inscribed its name in the annals of the national art. As is shown by André de Ridder in a work devoted to this "artists' colony," there is actually no school of St. Martens-Laethem. However, since the site is beautiful and life in a Flemish village is both comfortable and colorful, a community of artists has gathered there in friendly fashion at different times and for more or less prolonged periods. This is rather remarkable since the artists in question are of varying temperaments, talents and inspiration.

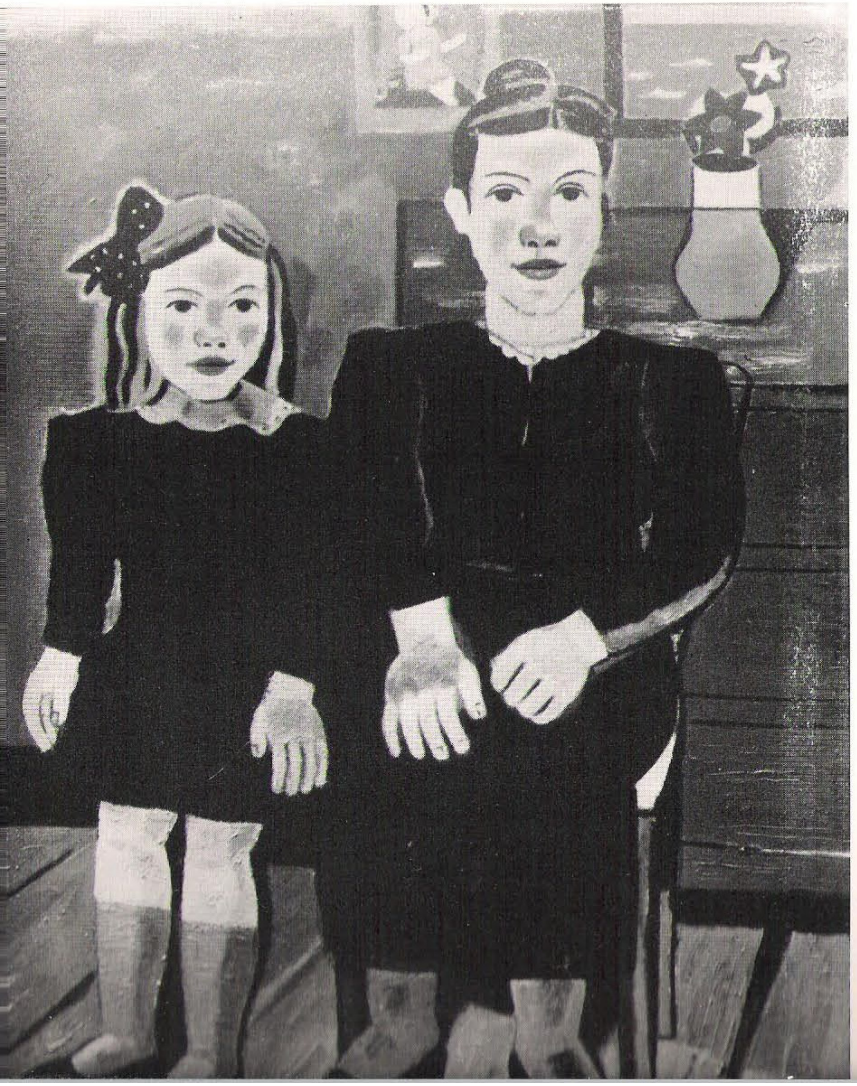
The first group was established at the beginning of the century, the other seven or eight years later. The former was animated chiefly by a spirit of reaction against the spread of impressionism. The second group was made up of artists of the same age who all undertook the struggle for life together. There was no head, no

Private Collection, Belgium

C. PERMEKE (1886)
Nude

G. DE SMET (1877-1943)
Mother and Child

Private Collection, New York



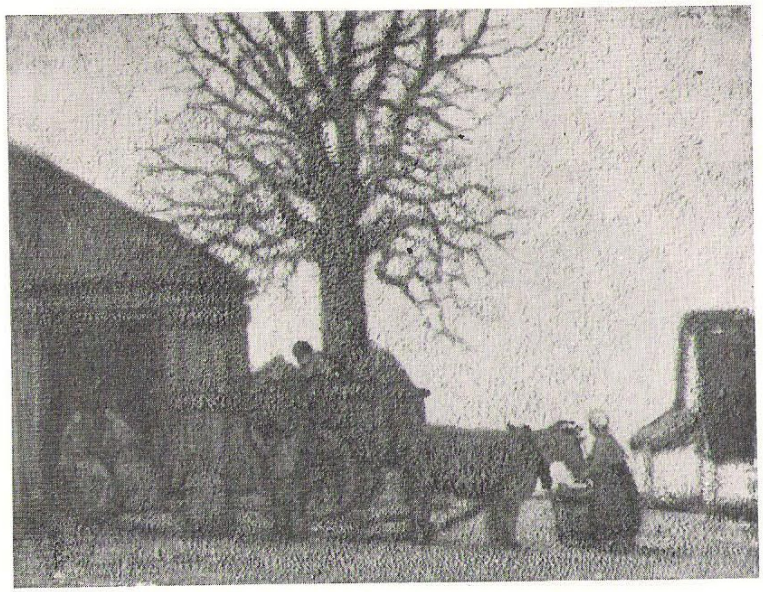
Collection E. Anseele, Jr., Ghent

F. VAN DEN BERGHE
The Labor Leader E. Anseele

leader. Except for de Saedeleer, born in Aalst, and Permeke, from Antwerp, the members of this colony had come from Ghent.

A. van den Abeele (1835-1918), a conscientious and sensitive landscape painter, lived at Laethem for a long time. He was the friend of the other painters of his village, yet æsthetically, he had nothing in common with them.

Valerius de Saedeleer (1867-1941) has an encompassing, panoramic vision of the landscape which calls to mind the Chinese painters rather than Bruegel. His work is the opposite of impressionism. His snow landscapes are clean, precise, sharply outlined, like a stained-glass window by the filigree of dry branches. De Saedeleer studied the masters of Northern Italy (Bellini) and of Brabant (Bruegel). He takes pleasure in depicting the hollows



Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

J. SMITS (1855-1928)
The Potato Harvest

and ridges of a field or valley, just as Van Eyck scrutinizes a wrinkled face. Yet the human visage is almost absent from his work.

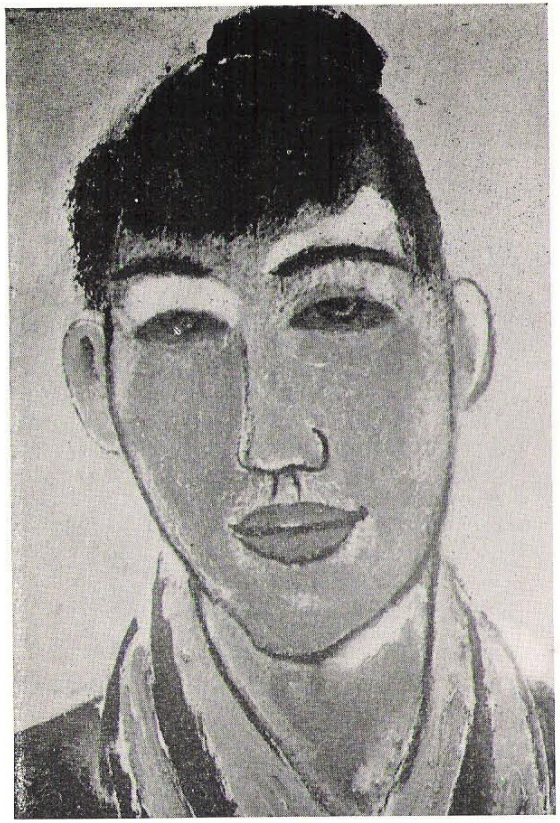
Georges Minne (1866-1941), sketcher and sculptor, idealized and stylized the human appearance. It is unlikely that this mystic Fleming found the ethereal models for his madonnas in Laethem. Nevertheless, he has instilled in the entire colony the feeling for the poignant reality of the misery of the poor.

Gustave van de Woestijne (1881-1947) was the brother of the great Flemish poet Karel van de Woestijne (1878-1929), who also spent several years at St. Martens-Laethem. A painter of faces, he was the first to show a tendency to deformation. He emphasized ugliness and vulgarity, especially among the peasants. He clothes his emotion in a form which recalls the Gothic art of the Rhineland. He knows and loves the country bumpkins whom he paints in an apparently trivial manner, but with an underlying seriousness.

Collection Mrs. Benjamin P. Watson, New York

C. PERMEKE (1886)
Peasant Woman

Albert Servaes (1883) comes from a family of shopkeepers, unlike the other painters of the first Laethem group, who are almost all well-to-do bourgeois with good intellectual preparation. He experienced several difficult years before devoting himself to painting and peasant life. He is a fiery, violent personality, like Léon Bloy. For a while he seemed to be a precursor. Profoundly religious, one day he painted the Way of the Cross with such crudeness that the highest ecclesiastical authorities barred his paintings from the church in which they had been placed by the very candid respect of the monks. His landscapes, hastily done, are as simple as those of Jacob Smits, although cruder. Probably in the hope of ridding himself of his persecution complex, Servaes made the criminal mistake of supporting the Nazis. Today he is an exile in Switzerland; he, more than many others, must be tormented by exile from his Flanders, which was so much a part of him.

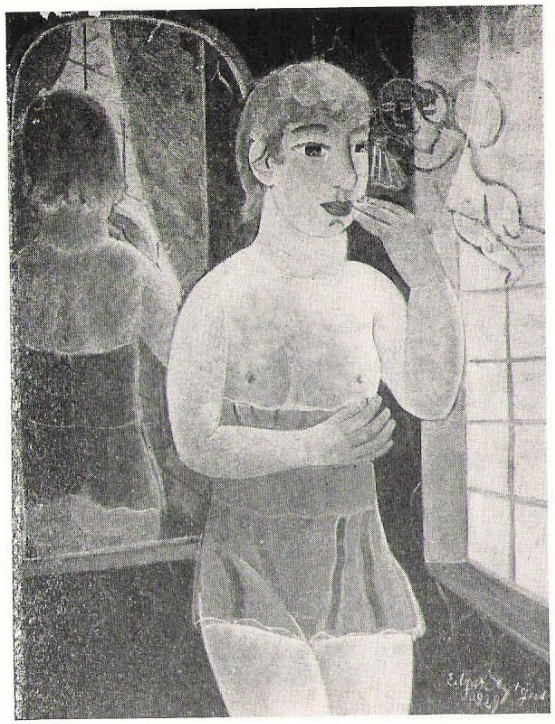


Private Collection, Belgium

G. DE SMET
Peasant Woman

Gustave de Smet (1877-1943), Frits van den Berghe (1883-1939) and Constant Permeke (1886) belong to the second set of the artists of Laethem. The writer, P. G. van Hecke, who was their friend, was to them what Karel van de Woestijne was to the earlier group.

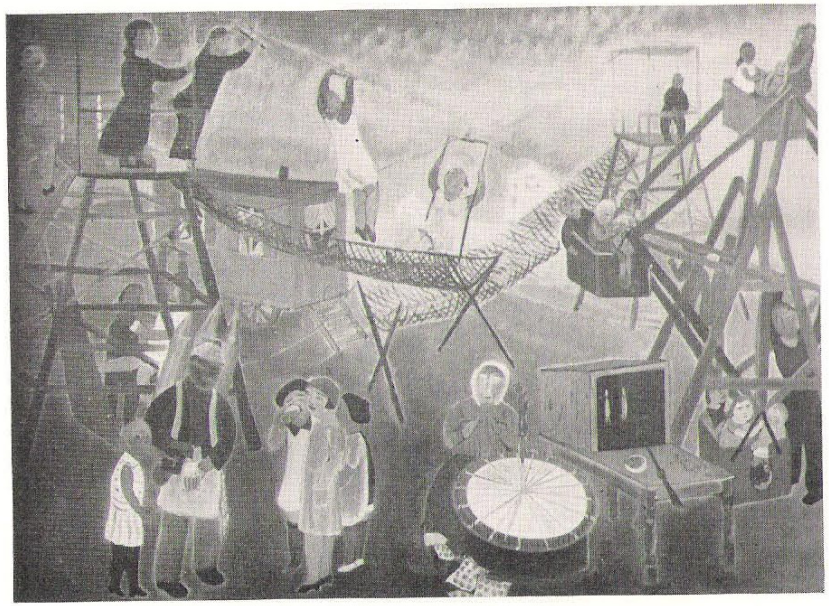
Gustave de Smet is profoundly Belgian, through his sensitivity and his sensuality. Like Jordaens he belongs to the land. Through his emotion and the constant delicacy of his coloring, more than through a frequently perfect balance of form, he succeeds in spiritualizing matter. He has created a natural and human world of



Collection J. Greshoff. Cape Town, So. Africa

E. TYTGAT (1879)
The Heavy Sorrow of a Flighty Girl

his own, a world of mysterious serenity and a strange quality of escape. Whether he is using the expressive technique he learned in Holland at the time of his exile in the war of 1914-1918 or the less distorted method he adopted after 1939, his evocative power is always intense. His serenity, his human logic show through his compositions as well as his landscapes. No matter what his plastic instrument, in all his work, he grasps the subtlety and tenderness of the life about him; he makes us feel that his world of pastorals and peasants is part of the destiny of all men. This transposition is the principal power of the great artists. Gustave de Smet is without doubt the most sensitive of all the modern painters of Flanders, and perhaps of Belgium. Because of this, and because



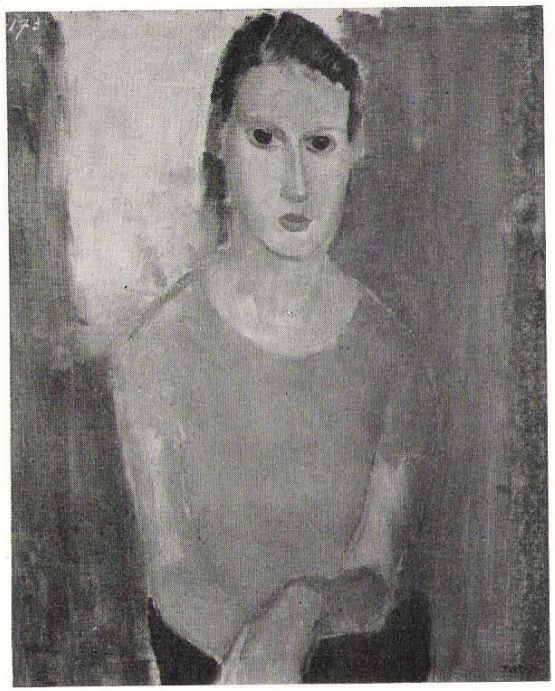
Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

E. TYTGAT (1879)
Sunday Afternoon

of his fervor and integrity, his work, which might have remained merely regionalistic, gives promise of a greater importance.

Frits van den Berghe (1883-1939), who has been called "the intellectual of the group," was instinctively a theoretician of great didactic gifts. He was, like Paul Klee whom he resembles at times, an excellent professor. His fantasy is light, his imagination radiant. He has an extremely keen sense of line, of color, of "atmosphere." Perhaps he lacked the moderation which characterized Ingres, and the sense of fitness which was the genius of Bruegel and of Picasso. In him, as in Pascin, there were the elements of the universal master. After the war of 1914-1918 he was absorbed in expressionist, social painting, but his best canvases were inspired by the surrealist influence, a surrealism closer to the art of fantasy than to the vision of dreams. Van den Berghe's fantasy is infinitely varied, especially in his form. Despite its unevenness, his art, in the few completed works, is gifted with great communicative power.

During the twenty years after the other war, Constant Permeke



Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp

H. DAEYE (1873)
The Betrothed

was the favorite of the Belgian avant garde amateurs and critics. He is a passionate, chaotic artist, particularly drawn to models chosen among the poor, the peasants and sailors, distorted with an exaggeration weighted down with fatality. Consciously or not, he was, for a long time and with an originality devoid of direct influences, a completely expressionist painter. Having taken refuge in England, in the war of 1914-1918, after he had been wounded on the battlefields of Flanders, he invented an expressionism which is really his alone. His brutality is ingenuous, his tenderness rough, his penetration of the human condition pitiless. All of his acts are free, with a freedom bordering on greatness. His lyricism is both constructive and destructive. A painter of contrasts, he employs, particularly in his marines and his landscapes, an inventive coloring in which he combines the heaviest and the

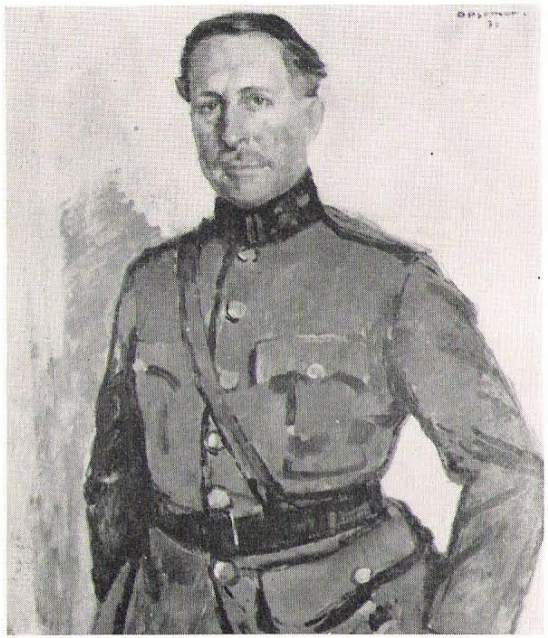
Private Collection, Belgium

BARON OPSOMER (1878)
Landscape in Holland

most delicate of tones. Constant Permeke is typical of the artist on the intuitive level, ignorant of symbols and doctrines, who finds in the contrast of forms and colors a powerfully balanced human expression.

Today Laethem has almost resumed routine village life. Its painters are dead or scattered. In the neighborhood, through a kind of attachment to familiar habit and inspiration, a few landscape painters of sound skill continue their work; Albert Saverys (1886), Hubert Malfait (1898), Jules De Sutter (1895) and Léon de Smet (1881), whose strongly eclectic work is inspired by a very definite taste and technique.

Sander Wynants (1903) belongs to the same tradition, which follows the expressionism of Flanders. With his very poignant feeling for the human passions, he returns to the inspiration of Bruegel, emphasizing the multitude of contrasts in modern life; he deliberately depicts the young Flemish peasant woman seated on the elephant of the Rajahs. In the same line of artists appear



Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, Hagerstown, Maryland

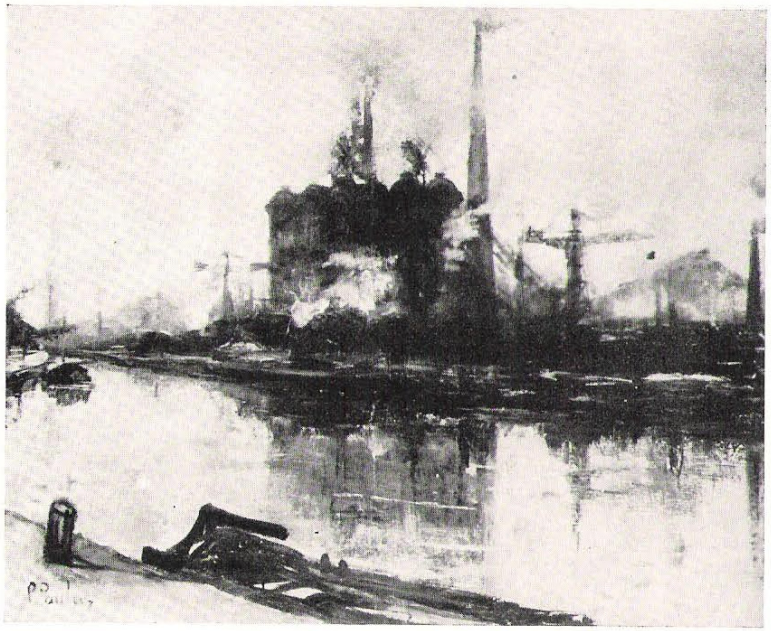
BARON OPSOMER (1878)
King Albert I

Julien van Vlasselaer (1905), a very powerful sketcher with whom, through a sort of reaction against the crisis in form, the plastic art becomes supreme, Prosper de Troyer (1880), Jean Timmermans (1900), Albert Van Dyck (1902), who like Gustave de Smet delves profoundly into regionalistic naturalism, and Jules Boulez (1889), whose preoccupation with the pleasant recalls Vlaminck.

Hippolyte Daeye (1873), born in Ghent but a resident of Antwerp, is a painter of subtle emotion; an impressionist, at first, he developed a very personal technique; its expressionism was moderated by his delicate melancholy and his desire for purification.

Fernand Schirren (1872-1944) stands with Rik Wouters as the best representative of Belgian fauvism. His oils and his watercolors, of exceptional purity, bring about a veritable regeneration of color. He is a spontaneous, self-taught artist, who played an important role in the transition between impressionism and the constructed, synthetic art which provides the program for the Belgian painter of today.

The feeling for volume, the "plastic sense" is found particularly



Collection Industrial Business Machines Corporation, New York

P. PAULUS (1881)
Blast Furnaces at Charleroi

in the Brussels painters Willem Paerels (1878), Philibert Cockx (1879), Charles Dehoy (1872) and Ramah (1887-1947), while Auguste Mambour (1896), from Liége, moves toward style and even toward stylization, with a very keen sense of the decorative, manifested in his murals and his impressions of the Congo.

While the sculptor Oscar Jespers (1887) seems to transform the most characteristic Flemish expressionism into clay, his brother, Floris Jespers (1889), has his own originality, especially in his paintings on glass in which his technique is exceptional. His viewpoint is that of an imagist. The sense of the picturesque and the witty, like the play of light, mitigates the heaviness of the city or country landscapes.

The concrete, synthetic art of Jan Brusselmans (1884) places him in the forefront of the expressionist school. His figures and landscapes are severe, with a perfect balance between pictorial

Private Collection

F. JESPERS (1887)
Marc, My Son

Private Collection, Brussels

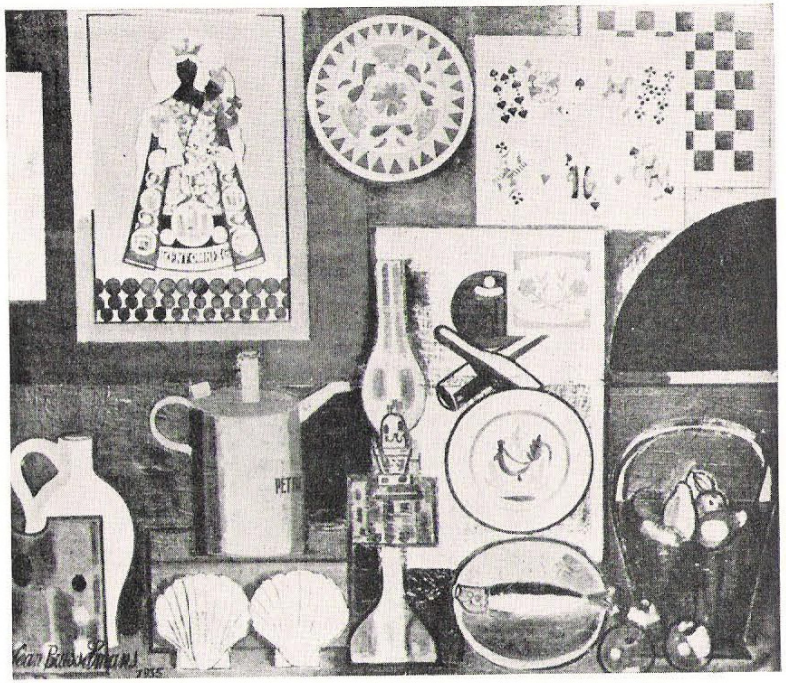
A. CARTE (1886)
The Acrobats

intensity and solid, inner lyricism. Few painters are so well organized in their plastic treatment, and so soberly though sincerely inspired.

Louis Thevenet (1874-1930), who worked with the intimate, popular subject, was a pioneer in this post-impressionist field. A very thoughtful artist, he might be called a local Van Gogh.

Léon Spilliaert (1881-1946), born in Ostend where he lived for a long time, has developed an art of some latitude. Using various techniques, in which the line remains graceful and pure, he cultivated a kind of desolate emotion. He symbolizes the imprisonment of beings and things, often enclosing them in a strange lattice-work.

Anto Carte (1886) and Georges Creten (1887) are eclectic and resourceful; the former modifies the subjects of Laermans and Jacob Smits, the latter stylizes the body and gestures of woman.

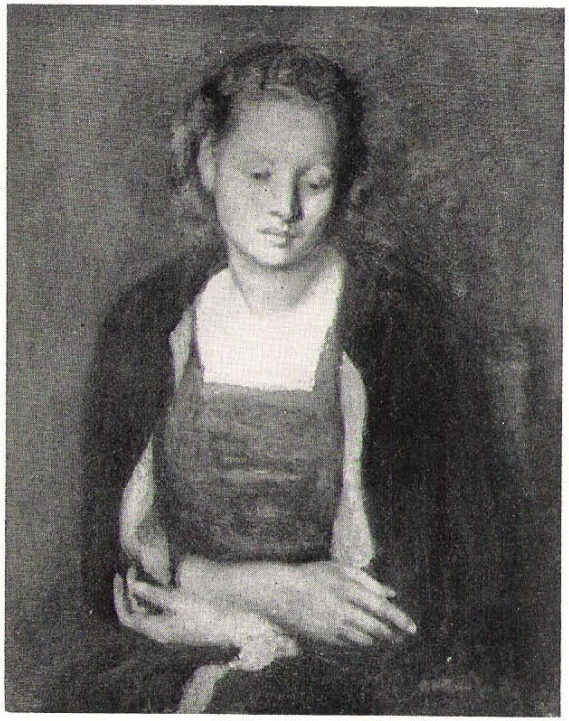


Private Collection, Brussels

JAN BRUSSELMANS
Still Life

Fernand Wéry (1886), a student of Cranach, shows the same tendency as Creten.

The Belgians have always had a natural, authentic humor, which they themselves are the first to belittle and depreciate. It is not difficult to pass for a fantasist. There was almost half a century of struggle and controversy before James Ensor was accepted. For the same reason Edgar Tytgat (1879) has not yet received the recognition he deserves. His ingenuous vision of the world, very close to that of the great Antwerp poet Max Elskamp, is considered "childish." Tytgat is an imagist of exquisite talent. He is a delicate colorist, with the gifts of the subtlest story-teller. His art has a folklore quality, but with a charming and sometimes rather cruel sense of the absurdities of life. In his greatly detailed narratives, he shows a tranquil and naive acceptance. One feels for him an affection like that felt for the gentle poets.



Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

A. VAN DYCK (1902)
Girl with Black Cape

Belgian painting, a traditional vocation surrounded by foreign influences, is a real crossroad. It includes all kinds of painting, bearing, in general, the national characteristics of abundance and skill. Such diversity makes classification difficult and imposes a routine nomenclature, at the risk of serious omissions. A relatively ordered classification can be arrived at only through the regionalistic aspects or through tendencies.

The leader of the school at Antwerp is undoubtedly Isidore Opsomer (1878), who succeeded in mastering the extravagance of his own temperament, and thus escaped from the influence of the schools, developing his own style in his landscapes and portraits. He is a "dramatist," both through his forceful inspiration

Private Collection, Antwerp

J. VINCK (1900)
At the Outskirts

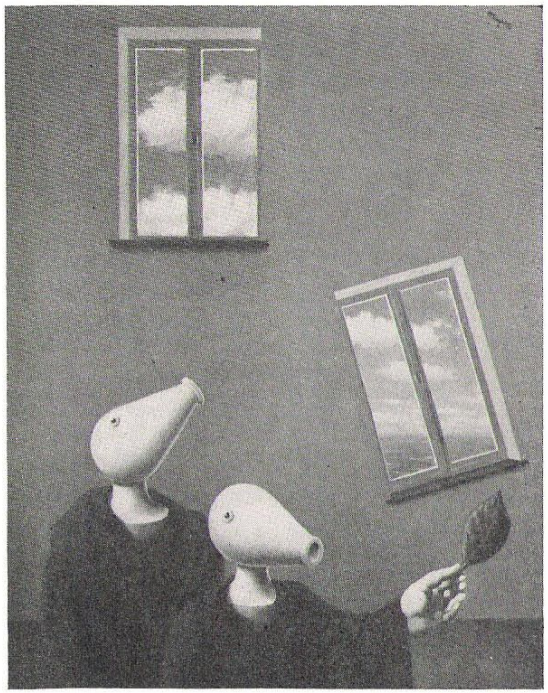
and his powerful pathos. Among his many talented pupils Julien Creytens (1895) should be cited.

At Liége, following the decorative tendency of Auguste Donnay (1862-1921), who transferred the evangelical idylls into the sorrowful setting of his city, came Armand Rassenfosse (1862-1934)). The latter subtly led back the ecstasy of Rops within the bounds of feminine softness.

The Walloon painters from the Ardennes include Robert Crommelynck (1895), whose strength is expressed in stylization, Albert Rathy (1889), Marie Howet (1897). Pierre Paulus (1881) is a faithful son of the Borinage; he describes broadly the tragic aspect of the coal-pits and blast furnaces, thus completing the setting for the personages of Constantin Meunier.

At Louvain, Alfred Delaunois (1876) sought out the interiors of churches and the peace of the cloisters.

In Ghent, Jean Delvin (1853-1922) was a fervent painter of



Private Collection, Brussels

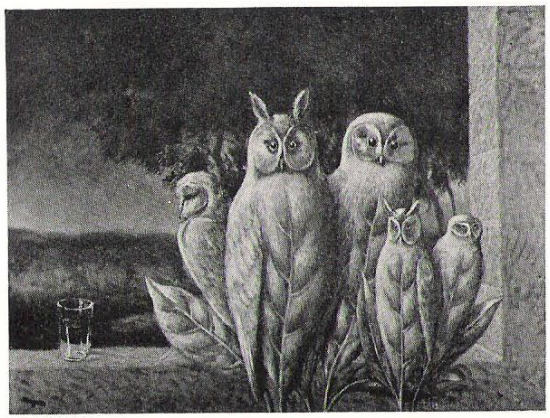
R. MAGRITTE (1898)
The Natural Encounters

animals, drawing his subjects from the heroic gestures of the bullfights.

Similarly, the contribution of the exotic animated such painters as the brothers Swyncop (Philippe, 1878, Charles, 1880), and Alfred Bastien (1873). The so-called genre painting produced adroit colorists like Apol (1879), Laudy (1877), Logelain (1889), J. Gouweloos (1868). It achieves a real delicacy with Robert Buyle (1895).

The anecdotic landscapists have as their leaders H. Cassiers (1858-1944) and L. Reckelbus (1864). Henri Thomas (1878) and Fernand Toussaint (1873) perpetuate the graceful tradition of Alfred Stevens.

In the line of Sisley and Pisarro, we find in Belgium Frantz Charlet (1862-1928) and Marcel Jefferys (1872-1924); in the line of Vuillard, Georges Lemmen (1865-1916). Walter Vaes (1882) and Maurice Wagemans (1877-1927) have left some pleasant still-lifes.



R. MAGRITTE (1898)
Image at the Window

Emile Fabry (1865), Constant Montald (1863-1944), Albert Ciamberlani (1864) and Jean Delville (1867) took steps to revive mural painting. The size of their symbolic compositions does not make them any more poignant or decorative. The decorative function was left finally to the attention of the "plastic" painters such as P. Flouquet (1900) and Victor Servranckx (1897), who do not object to wedding painting to architecture.

Lastly, the most solidly gifted Belgian etcher is Jules de Bruycker (1870-1946). Born in Ghent, in the shadow of the belfries and old chateaux, he found in them the setting for these scenes of market-places and cabarets in which the brashness of the old masters comes to life again.

The Young Painters.

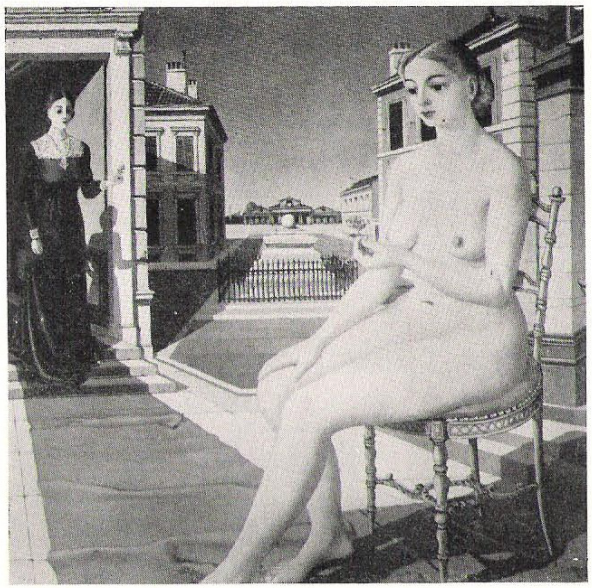
A vital youth seeks its way among the influences of the local masters, often their professors, and among foreign trends. It is in search of its "self," through the medium of color, and still stands at the fork in the road. As prime examples I would like to cite: War van Overstraten, whose revolutionary political background makes him favor humanism; Albert Dasnoy, sutble colorist; René Guiette (1893), who has adapted from cubism, in stubborn opposition to rampant expressionism, a flair for line relationships within the most ordinary objects; Louis van Lint, preoccupied with the decorative, whose symbolism has an Ensorian

Collection Industrial Business Machines Corporation, New York

J. CREYTENS (1895)
Harbor of Antwerp

liveliness; Marc Mendelson, who, more realist than surrealist, has a truly magic feeling for inanimate things; Charles Pry, more literally surrealist; Alice Frey (1895), who, with her spontaneous sensitivity, moves from the pastoral to the grotesque; Jean Cox, a mystic; Emile Mahy, Anne Bonnet, Meg Quinet, who profess a kind of pictorial existentialism; Jack Godderis, J. Creytens, R. Slabbinck and Luc Peire, instinctive Flemings, and Gaston Bertrand, a stylist of the pathetic distortion, in the line of Modigliani.

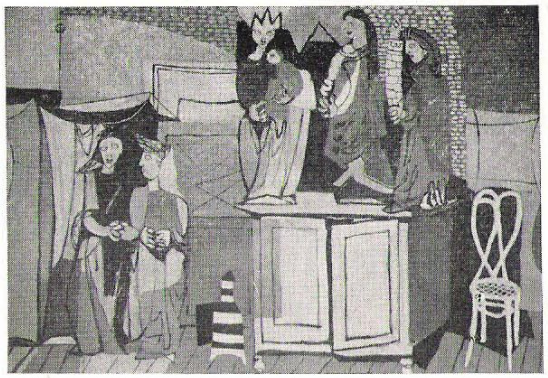
While the critics have attempted to group the features common to certain young painters under the heading of "animism," it does not yet seem wise to designate the collective interest of a school among those whom I have just cited. Nor can such a spirit



P. DELVAUX (1897)
The First Rose

be indicated in the very real talents of Suzanne van Damme whose portraits are profoundly human, of Marcel Stobbaerts (1899) whose vehement, naturally eloquent temperament is nevertheless capable of tenderness and abandon, of Jacques Maes (1905) whose landscapes have a real distinction, nor of Mayou Iserentant, who is sometimes drawn to the verge of surrealism by his passion for the whimsical and the fantastic. As a matter of fact, each of the artists now producing tries out his own ideas within the framework of local tradition or in rebellion against it. The schools have temporarily lost their power of convocation. The sole conclusion that can now be reached is that art, just emerging from man's torments, is at present, by way of reaction, passing through a phase of individualism.

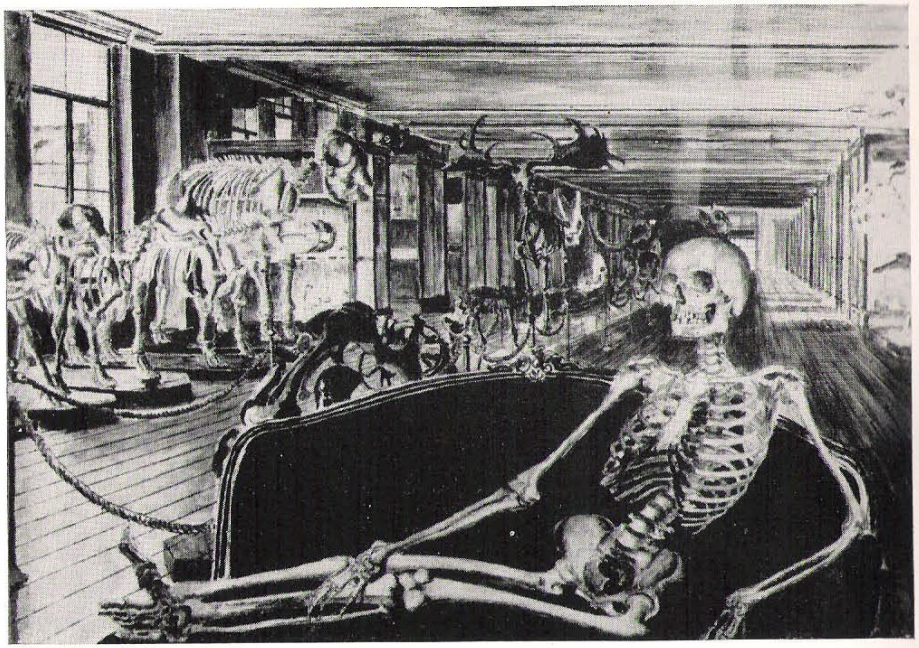
However, one very definite trait has become evident in Belgian painting in recent years owing to a tendency deriving from the motivation which so richly inspired the painters of the past, toward the universal spread of the spiritual. This tendency has as its principal leaders the two young painters, René Magritte and Paul Delvaux, whose real worth must inevitably find world-wide recognition.



M. MENDELSON (1915)
Statues in the Studio

Private Collection, Belgium

René Magritte (1898) has joined the "surrealist revolution" and has remained unswervingly loyal to the spiritual movement he has chosen. This loyalty has no doubt constrained him to observe a kind of ethical program but has never interfered with his astonishing inventive powers. He does not succumb to the failing which so often besets the sterile, imitative worker; that the doctrine must shape the work. Through the very force of his inspiration, his work is reunited with the doctrine and justifies it. Actually, Magritte is one of the finest inventors known to the art of painting. In order to avoid the cubist of dadaist weakness for the charm of subjects and colors, he uses an unusually severe technique which is voluntarily and rigidly traditional. Employing this technique as an instrument, or even better, as a permanently established dialectic, he reaches a metaphysical plane; as André Breton has said, on this level he undertakes "the systematic prosecution of the visual image, whose faults he has underlined . . . It is conducted within the confines of the physical and the mental, where each picture becomes the solution of a new problem." There is a poignantly poetic mystery in the opposition, fundamental in Magritte, between the visual image and the human interpretation which transposes the image. In the presence of this poetic mystery, the spirit's flight soars across all the stages of the known and is renewed. P. G. van Hecke writes, "It is as though René Magritte had invented a new mythology." This is true, for, after all, mythology is the image which man makes for himself and which he can, thanks to the painter, reconstruct from the unknown, at any time. Magritte is an artist who has already had considerable influence outside the borders of his own land and who



Private Collection, Brussels

P. DELVAUX (1897)
Skeleton

will go on to further development. His power of invention is so rich that he cannot suffer from having been imitated by famous adapters. Alert collectors and the large modern museums of Europe and the United States are on the lookout for his most significant works.

The production of René Magritte, tireless in its inspiration, is large and varied. Recently, it has experienced a kind of crisis as regards the pictorial method; the painter has experimented with the transposition to the painting, not of the light which illuminates the things painted, but of the light, which might be called objective, that surrounds us. Judging by the results, which bring to mind the excesses of decadent impressionism, one might think of this as an experiment of the palette rather than as a new intellectual approach. The technique which culminates in the representation of an image never has the resiliency of the mind that discovers or explains a mystery.

Private Collection, Brussels

R. SLABBINCK (1914)
Mother and Child

If Magritte, without being imprisoned by it, serves surrealism with praiseworthy devotion, Paul Delvaux (1897) uses it and having drawn on it, goes beyond it. He is, above all, a great visionary. While his method has been successively influenced by impressionism, expressionism and surrealism, he has been able to maintain and increase his obsessing need to attain the invisible world. Today, having gone through the preliminary stages, he is the independent master of his technique and his inspiration. Both are prodigious. On the other hand, his tones are pure, his colors well applied, without too much paint, without smudges, without tricks of the brush. It has been said that Delvaux's approach is somewhat like that of the Chinese painter, the illuminator and the week-end painter. The settings are astonishing for

the virtuosity of detail as well as for the balance of composition. From the first glimpse, one is captivated by the majesty and grandeur of his work. One senses immediately that he is a great painter who will never be enslaved by his art and whose pictorial skill opens wide the door for inspiration, never hesitating before it, no matter how tremendous.

On the other hand, Delvaux, true to his visionary nature, obeys the commands of his imagination. He paints the settings of his dreams and the people by whom he is haunted. He draws upon the particulars of the life we know, on his memory, or upon his knowledge, to construct the architecture or the landscapes by which he is obsessed. He selects women, children and adolescents in their luxuriously exact nudity, grasping vividly the uncomeliness and grotesque tawdriness of modern mankind, including the painter himself. He reconstructs all this visible world, as though to give it freedom, within the topsy-turvy yet always poetically logical order of his vision. His state of dream, of trance or of exasperation transforms the entire universe and interprets it for us in a witty form, in which the desires of the mind and the flesh escape from the routine. Thus we see such an extraordinary sight as the trolley-car that runs alongside a factory, in the direction of some lace-curtained houses, as it patiently awaits the Praxiteles' Venuses; or we see the intruder in the derby hat (who looks enough like the painter to be mistaken for him) with a procession of majestic virgins.

In addition to the fact that Paul Delvaux offers us the wonderful bargain of exchanging our poor world for a universe magnificently reconstructed by the painter within his magical brain, through the co-existence of his power of evocation with the exactness of our present destiny he makes us witnesses of the drama of a dreamer's effort to seize reality. This is quite the contrary of the usual drama, the excuse for so much weary lyricism, in which the poor hero is always in search of the dream. Here we have what constitutes, especially, the new and distracting contribution of Paul Delvaux and what authorizes us to think of him, with the agreement of all those in Europe and America who have been able to consider his works, as one of the most promising and significant painters of today.

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In its modern period, Belgian painting has been sensualist, material, bound to the land which gave it birth. Understanding and intelligence have participated only incidentally, as in the case of Wiertz and Ensor. With Magritte and Delvaux, the intellect again comes into its own. The motivation, the source of stimulation and delectation are no longer drawn from religious faith or social indignation, as in the past, nor from the satisfaction of the senses, as in the modern period: today they arise from the awareness of the existence of a subconscious state, from the affirmation of the magic values of life and of a transcendent reality which come from the dream, the obsession, the psychic will, freed from the bonds of customary morality and the constraints of society. Magritte and Delvaux and the young painters who will follow or who have already appeared, like Olivier Picard, possess, in addition to the specifically national qualities of their predecessors, a keener sensitivity which helps them to increase and broaden their vision of the world. It is this sensitivity which will permit them to break through the political frontiers of their small country, giving their universal value to the whole world. These two painters speak a language which is intelligible to the entire human community. The chief significance of their work is that it has restored to Belgian art the fundamental quality which it had lost in modern times: its universality.

Sensitivity, varying from country to country, from age to age, from province to province, from man to man, is regional, by its very nature. Intelligence, on the other hand, is universal and eternal.

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